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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the journey of a former female electrician turned technical and further education teacher turned professional development officer who is now completing her PhD. It also describes the challenges she overcame to make the transition from tradesperson to researcher. It is a personal account of discovery. It describes the most important relationship between role changes and professional growth. Most importantly, this paper develops the argument that without sustained access to purposeful conversations that promote higher order thinking skills, teachers are unlikely to become able to see their work as problematic and identify their practices as research. (YLB)

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Problems to problematics – a journey

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The concept of practitioners as researchers is attractive in the vocational education sector. Many vocational teachers are former professionals who value practical knowledge more highly than academic knowledge. However, if the lack of practitioner-based research reported on at conferences is any indication, it would seem that not many vocational education and training (VET) professionals view their work as research.

This paper describes the journey of a former female electrician turned technical and further education (TAFE) teacher turned professional development officer who is now completing her PhD. It also describes the challenges she overcame to make the transition from tradesperson to researcher. It is a personal account of discovery (What? There is more than ONE reality and truth may not be true?). It describes the important relationship between role changes and professional growth. Most importantly, this paper develops the argument that without sustained access to purposeful conversations which promote higher order thinking skills, teachers are unlikely to become able to see their work as problematic and identify their practices as research.

This paper may well be typical of the outcome when a practitioner becomes a researcher – it makes no apology for its lack of references to the academic literature and relies on and celebrates personal experience as a valid form of data.

Being an electrician is a black and white affair. I don't mean that I went to work in hat and tails; I mean that in electrical work there is a clear sense of what is, and what isn't. My work revolved around solving problems that relied on observable or quantifiable data. Answers were right or wrong – sometimes painfully wrong. I certainly didn't identify any interpretive elements in my work. Things simply *were*. Just as I was sure of the absolute nature of my own work, I was sceptical, suspicious and critical of the world of 'academics'. What value was their knowledge that was based not on the fact of experience but on conversations and thinking?

Clearly, during the years when I was contracting as an electrician, my view of the world was in very concrete terms. For me truth was an absolute. I also believed that there was only one version of reality defined by what could be measured and quantified. Anything else was just 'airy fairy nonsense'.

A little over ten years ago I joined TAFE as a teacher of electrical trades. In the first instance I found teaching to be a strange environment. On the one hand I was still dealing with those reliable, consistent facts that had underpinned and been the focus of my work as a tradesperson. Ohm's Law was wonderfully persistent and unchanging. Electrons continued to behave in the same way they had since we became aware of them a century ago. However, students and teaching and learning were not so predictable. What might work with one student or even with a whole class would very likely not work with the next group of teenage apprentices.

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Now I do recognise that during their late teenage years, young men are generally unpredictable and totally unfathomable anyway. But put them in an apprenticeship where they suddenly have an income, are distracted by any female within 500 metres, have their driving license and probably their first car, and have reached an age where it's legal for them to drink alcohol - and you're definitely setting them up for a less than ideal learning experience. It's a period in their lives that in my experience places teenage boys in a category parallel but not quite the same as other human beings.

I point this out so that you have some idea of the context in which I was struggling to make the transition from 'tradesperson' to 'teacher'. There is another dimension to that context: my colleagues. Predictably, they were all male. In fact, at the time there was only one other female electrical trades teacher in NSW TAFE and she was located in Broken Hill. I was very much an anomaly. The difference was not only gender. It was also that while I tended to think of myself as a teacher who just happened to have been an electrician, my male counterparts considered themselves to be electricians who taught in TAFE.

The distinction between a teacher with a trades background and a tradesperson who is teaching may not seem significant to you. I didn't realise it would make a difference until I began my tertiary studies. I haven't any concrete proof for those of you who feel more comfortable when things are validated with data. However, in my experience I suggest that a tradesperson who teaches tends to take an instrumental approach to teaching. They seem to think in terms of teacher inputs causing student outputs. They value concrete knowledge gained through experience above constructed knowledge agreed to through social interactions. On the other hand, and again this is only observation from my own experience, I suggest that a teacher with a trades background is more likely to recognise learning as a social experience and that teaching is only one of many elements that affects whether or not a student achieves the desired outcome.

We are now at the main point of this discussion. How does an individual shift from being a *tradesperson who teaches* to a *teacher with a trades background*. Well, I don't know the definitive answer to this question, but I can tell you what helped me.

When I completed my Diploma of Teaching (Technical) with the University of Technology Sydney, I began to teach part time in the Education Faculty of that institution. I have been with them as a part timer for nearly ten years now and have progressed through a Bachelors Degree and Masters studies and am currently working on my Doctorate – all in education. I don't tell you this in an attempt to somehow develop a sense of credibility. Rather, it's part of the way I made the transition to teacher.

You see, one of the unique advantages of being a part-time lecturer is that it places you within a new discourse. Although part timers aren't fully integrated into the social and work dynamics of the faculty, they are to some extent included in the conversations that go on between staff members. In my case I was fortunate enough to work with a group that welcomed critique of their work and enjoyed conversation and debate around the topics and subjects we were teaching.

At first I found this threatening. After all, what could I possibly know compared with the vast knowledge that I attributed to full-time university staff? I was a mere mortal after all. With time however, I began to learn the language – and academics do speak in a language which for a novice was as separatist and excluding of outsiders as I imagine the use of Latin in the Church was. As I became more fluent, I made a discovery that for me was a revelation.

> There is more than one version of reality.
>
> Truth is not singular and not absolute.

Now, before you shake your head and wonder how anyone could not already know these things, consider the background I have just described. In my world, you flicked a switch and the light went on. If it didn't, there was a logical reason why. It was a surprise for me to discover that in the world of teaching the definitions of switch and light were arguable, and there was not necessarily a causal relationship between the operation of one and a change in state of the other.

Once I understood and accepted these two revelations, my shift from tradesperson to teacher became much more obvious. My whole approach to teaching and learning refocused from being concerned with what *I* knew and what *I* did in the classroom to what the students were trying to know and what they were doing in the classroom. Even more important, I began to understand that each student was constructing their own version of reality in different ways and that though some facts were agreed and unquestioned, truth was not. This is not just about learning styles and similar notions. It's about how people perceive the world and what's important to them.

The undergraduate students I worked with were almost all new TAFE teachers. In the lecture room they would (with my encouragement) argue and question what was being presented to them in the literature. We spent much of our time discussing the effect of the contexts in which they taught had on how they interpreted the university subject material and how they would translate and incorporate that knowledge into their teaching practices. I often disagreed with their views but quickly learnt to recognise that they were equally as valid as my own.

In the mid 1990s my primary work shifted from the trades classroom to a professional development role within TAFE. This shift was also instrumental in shaping (or reshaping) my thinking. As I came into contact with a wider cross-section of teaching and related educational staff, I was exposed to a wider range of views on education, teaching and learning, and teachers and learners. I quickly learned that the most appropriate answer to most educational questions began with 'It depends …'. I also learned that when working in a professional development role, it's more important to know the right questions to ask than it is to know the right answers.

So, how did I get to this point and what is relevant to you? Well, I think the pivotal element for me was dialogue. Both as a part-time lecturer and in my professional development role I had lots of opportunities to talk and argue. The people I worked with in each of these contexts exposed me to a wide range of perspectives and viewpoints that my own teaching experiences would not have caused me to consider. In retrospect I was engaging in an ongoing dialogue.

Another important element was research. I continued my own tertiary studies through Bachelors, Masters and now Doctoral research. Some of my colleagues sniggered and told me I was foolish to complete my degrees by research rather than coursework. They wondered why I would deliberately take the hard route. I confess there were times when I thought much the same. However, again with the benefit of hindsight, I can now identify that by rethinking my work problems as problematics I learnt more about teaching and learning than I think I would have otherwise. The research process forced me to unpack, critique and argue my ideologies and practices, and then explain and justify them to my supervisor. In the process I changed my mind a thousand times, contradicted myself constantly and jumped the fence regularly before choosing to sit on it.

As a result I have come to a conclusion. I don't declare it to be truth. It is based on my own experiences - my own version of reality - and is as follows.

I believe that if teachers are engaged in purposeful conversations for sustained periods, and if those conversations are mediated to promote critique, debate and challenging of assumptions underpinning their teaching practices, it is likely that they (the teachers) will begin to think of their teaching and related problems as problematics and will make the shift from *tradesperson who teaches* to *teacher with a trade background.*

Now, what we should do with this conclusion I don't know. For this former electrician it's enough to have reached this point. I suspect that my journey is not yet complete, and perhaps at a future AVETRA gathering I may be able to tell the story of what happened next. Until then...

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